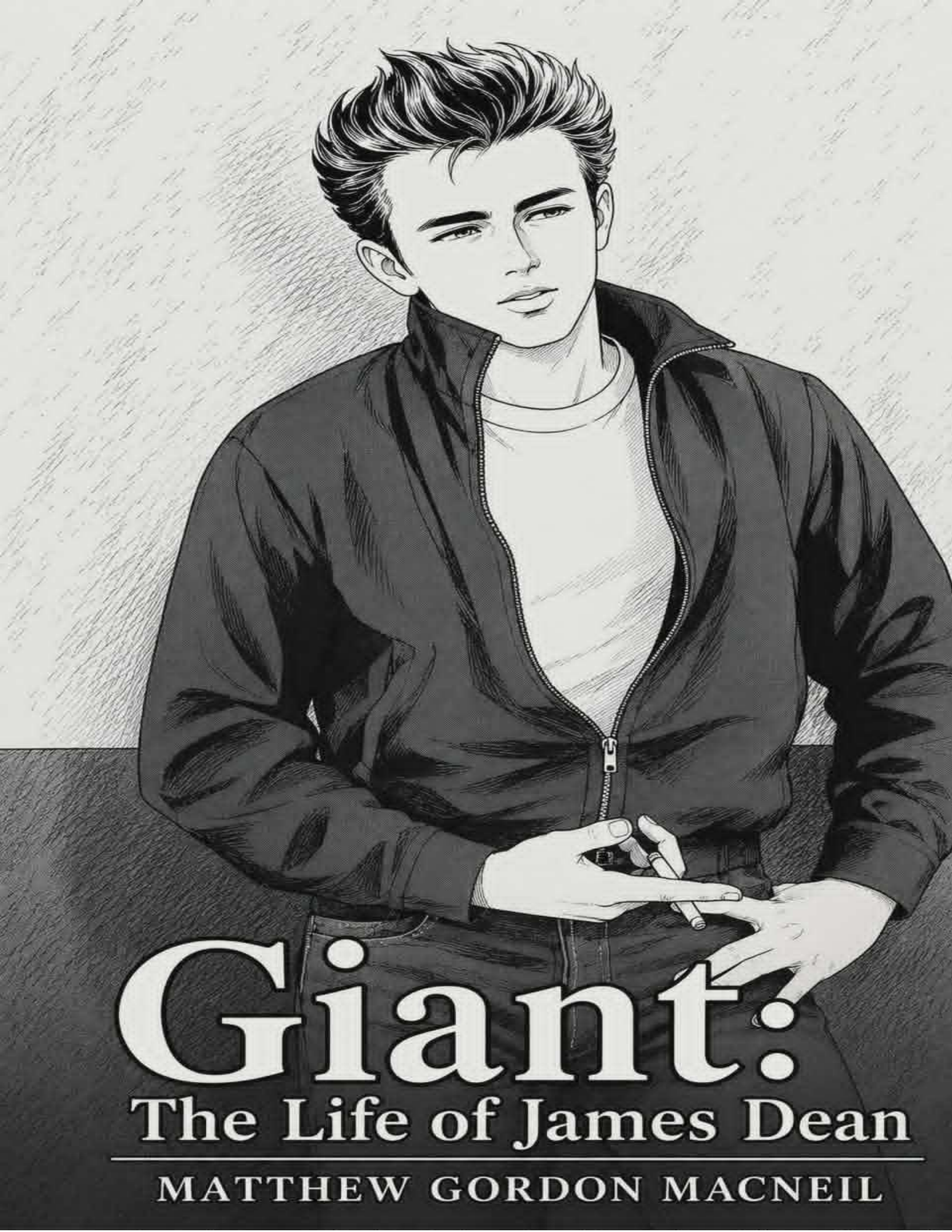

Giant:
The Life of James Dean

MATTHEW GORDON MACNEIL

Giant: The Life of James Dean

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

James Byron Dean took his first breath on February 8th, 1931, in Marion, Indiana, the son of Winton Dean and Mildred Wilson.

His father belonged to an Irish Protestant family who traced their roots back to County Antrim, in the North of Ireland, in

the 1760s. Mildred's family were of Welsh and English extraction with some Native American ancestry (though which tribe her ancestry traced back to is currently unknown).

Both sides had been living in Indiana for generations making a living as farmers. Winton had broken away from this tradition and became a dental technician shortly before marrying Mildred in 1930, who was heavily pregnant at the time (the two apparently unable to restrain themselves).

Mildred's father, John William Wilson, made his disproval of this premarital situation plain. He did not threaten Winton directly but made it clear he would 'load up his shotgun' if the young man did not marry his daughter and avoid scandal, which in rural Indiana (as well as most places then) would certainly be what happened given the conservative nature of the times.

Whether Winton loved Mildred or simply married her out of a combination of fear and obligation is anyone's guess, but marry her he did.

The family remained in Marion after James' birth, his mother immediately setting to work building a suitable household for her son to grow up in. Unlike Winton, who was concerned with appearances, money, and 'worldly' interests, Mildred was drawn to the arts. Nothing illustrates this point more than her son's middle name, picked to honour not a relative or close family friend, but one of her favorite poets, George Gordon Byron, one of Britain's greatest writers in the 19th century.

The home the Dean family lived in was an old, run down place where high winds caused the shutters to rap and front door to blow in on occasions it wasn't entirely secure. Called Green Gables Apartment, it offered only the basic necessities of shelter but neither Winton or Mildred complained, making do with what they could while providing for their newborn son.

For the first three years of his life Jimmy spent most of his time in the apartment with his mother, Mildred doting on him every second of every day. It was only a year before that she lost her own mother, Minnie May, a loss that left her an emotional wreck and which was only made worse by her father's decision to remarry to a widow within months of his first wife's passing.

Reeling from these emotional blows Mildred Dean poured all her efforts into raising her boy, babying him to the point where Winton, not one to show emotion, thought she would turn Jimmy into a 'sissy' but she paid no mind to this comment.

Despite this the two, at least initially, got along well. Winton, while not interested in Mildred's hobbies, saw in them something different than what the average Indiana housewife of the 1930s usually enjoyed. He called her his 'little Bohemian', a nod to the Bohemian lifestyle artists in Paris and Greenwich village, New York, lived, and Mildred read about frequently. She soaked it up, dreaming of her own artistic future. On days when Winton didn't work Mildred often tried to get him invested in poetry reading or novels, but he was not a reader or even remotely taken with intellectual ideas.

In short, it is not a stretch to say Winton Dean was a simple man, some might even classify him as 'hillbilly' like, a mismatch to the open minded and curious Mildred, a contrast that soon became apparent to both and caused friction starting in Jimmy's second year.

At age four Jimmy and his family left Marion for Santa Monica, California where his father got a job working at a Hospital. Leaving their home state took more of a toll on Mildred than it did on Winton, the man aloof and detached even from his own family. To pass the time she invented games for her and Jimmy to play, acting out parts and staging grand adventures in their small home Winton rented.

Mildred read to him from a variety of different sources including children's books, poetry, and some of the adult novels she was reading at the time, believing opening him up to the world of books early would help his mental growth.

California, while still technically in it's 'Old West' phase, which wouldn't end completely until 1939, was hardly as dangerous as it had once been. It offered the Deans a comfortable atmosphere, with stores and entertainment close at hand.

Hollywood at the time was transitioning from silence film to 'Talkies', a shift that both improved the quality of storytelling and also saw the destruction of dozens of careers as some actors couldn't make the switch, their voices unfit for it.

Knowing Mildred's artistic side it is highly likely she paid attention to the happenings going on in the film industry as much as time would allow. She went to watch films whenever she could afford it, and took Jimmy to a few animated pictures when they were in town.

Winton, as aloof as he was back in Indiana, was not a constant presence in his son's life in the normal sense. He was there 'but not there'. He showed little affection to either Jimmy or Mildred at this point, preferring to focus solely on work and his friends, widening the wedge between them even.

This rift caused mother and son to grow closer, Mildred becoming her son's confidante, best friend, and primary playmate. The two could often be seen together playing on the porch fighting imaginary foes or reciting poetry to one another, a scene that startled and intrigued their neighbours.

It's safe to say Jimmy's love of acting and playing pretend stemmed from these playtimes with his mother. He tried once and awhile to persuade his father to join in but Winton, like many people of his time (and some in ours, unfortunately)

thought acting of any kind was done by people not quite right in the head and he wanted no part in it.

Winton believed boys should play baseball or other 'manly' sports and hobbies, to that end he bought Jimmy a baseball bat and mitt, trying to play the game with him on Saturdays. But Jimmy, whether due to his father's roughness or simply not being too interested in baseball, did not perform well, leaving Winton disgusted.

Mildred noticed Jimmy struggled to see and pointed this out to Winton who took the boy to his hospital where Mildred was proven accurate and Jimmy was given his first pair of glasses, the first of many during his lifetime.

Things started to turn for the worst for Jimmy in 1940 when his mother started experiencing sharp pains in her chest. An X-Ray revealed she was suffering from breast cancer, and the tumor was already in the late stages. There was nothing they could do for her except keep her comfortable.

Mildred Dean passed away on July 14th, 1940 at the age of

twenty nine. Winton had sent a letter to his mother Emma a few months prior asking her to come out to California to help look after Mildred and Jimmy, now she returned with both her daughter in law's body and nine year old grandson.

Winton sent Jimmy back with his mother, so he said, because he couldn't raise him on his own, but given his cold nature towards his son it's not too far fetched to imagine he simply didn't want the burden now that his wife was gone.

Whatever the case Jimmy was brought back to his father's hometown of Fairmont where his aunt Ortense and her husband, Marcus Winslow, took him in to be raised alongside their young children.

It would be years before he saw his father again.

Jimmy never got over the loss of his mother, for a long time after her passing he would visit her grave in Marion and cling to it, only to be pulled away by his uncle Marcus and taken home.

At first Jimmy struggled to adapt to his new environment but soon fell into the daily routine of the Winslow household. The Winslows, Quakers, were a strict but loving couple who took their roles as guardians seriously. Both Ortense and Marcus did their best to welcome Jimmy into the family, treating him like he was one of their own.

They indulged his mood swings, rarely made him join in doing chores, and pampered him in ways they didn't do for their own biological children which, luckily, didn't cause resentment among the cousins. It took the summer of 1940 to familiarize Jimmy with the surrounding town, a settlement his uncle's ancestor, Joseph Winslow, helped found back in the 1830s.

The new home lacked books or music, and no imaginary enemies to fight. It was a total shift from the world Jimmy knew. The art his mother loved was absent and in its place was the lifestyle his father appreciated, albeit with love and care.

Soon Jimmy came to call Ortense and Marcus 'mom and dad' severing the ties to Winton who was too busy in California to

care.

School, a rough experience at first, with Jimmy seeming lost and dazed much of the time early on (even breaking down in class one time from missing his mother so much), became just another part of his Fairmont routine. He spent time with his paternal grandparents Charles and Emma Dean on their farm which was close to the Winslows.

Life continued like this for many years, with Jimmy becoming absorbed into Fairmont's town life. He continued acting out skits for both his own personal pleasure and to entertain the Winslows, developing a love of acting that blossomed into a passion.

Upon reaching high school Jimmy's focus turned increasingly in two directions. Acting and basket ball. In the former he found a kindred spirit in his teacher Adeline Nall who was just as passionate about acting and theatre as he was.

Jimmy, still carrying his childhood trauma, could be standofish, rude, and shy all in one but Mrs. Nall worked on

him, breaking down his defenses, seeing the potential underneath his difficult exterior.

While Adeline was a positive influence on his life, another, darker one came into it around the same time in the form of Reverend James DeWeerd.

A native of Fairmont, DeWeerd had been away when Jimmy first arrived in town after his mother's passing, only returning after the end of the Second World War where he quickly took a liking to the young, impressionable Dean.

DeWeerd, a closeted gay man, took Jimmy under his wing early on. A worldly man who loved the arts like Mildred did, DeWeerd lent Jimmy books, music, and took him to the movies, slowly earning his trust.

DeWeerd, preying on Dean's need for a father figure, groomed him. On the one hand the Reverend acted as a confidante, offering advice and encouragement towards Jimmy's budding ambitions at being an actor.

On the other hand, DeWeerd exploited Jimmy's vulnerable emotional state to take advantage of him for his own perverted purposes, engaging in oral sex with Dean at first before moving on to full intercourse. At the time Jimmy, eager for acceptance and afraid he would push DeWeerd away, said nothing to anyone of this rape, only opening up about it years later to Elizabeth Taylor while on the set of Giant.

It is unclear for how long DeWeerd abused Dean but it was for several years at least, Jimmy doing his best to keep their 'relationship' secret from the Winslows and his friends at school.

In 1949, convinced he was destined for a career as an actor, and wishing to get away from DeWeerd, Jimmy left Indiana to live with his father and his wife, Ethel Case. Winton allowed his son to stay with him on the condition he attend Santa Monica College studying law. Jimmy agreed but soon decided he couldn't take law school and transferred to UCLA to study Drama, a choice that infuriated Winton but Jimmy, at this point, didn't care what his father thought of his chosen career path.

Surprisingly Winton didn't kick him out, begrudgingly accepting his son's choice, though he did let him know plainly he thought it an idiotic move.

Regardless of what his father thought Jimmy was dead set on pursuing a life in the arts and UCLA was where he would begin to realize his dream.

William Bast first saw James Dean during UCLA's production of Shakespeare's Macbeth where Jimmy played the role of Prince Malcolm, based on the historical Malcolm III of Scotland, the wronged son of slain monarch Duncan I seeking revenge.

The performance, according to Bast in his memoir Surviving James Dean, left much to be desired. Jimmy, to Bast, lacked any sort of talent in acting, fumbling around on stage with all of the grace of a fish flopping about on land.

His girlfriend at the time, Joanna, was in the play as well, hence why he was there in the first place, and once it wrapped she took Bast backstage to meet Dean whom she

described as a terrific guy.

Entering Jimmy's dressing room the two walked in on him sizing himself up in the mirror curiously bumping his belt buckle against the glass.

William quipped it looked like fun, earning a grunt and glare from Dean who didn't seem to take the joke in a good natured way.

Despite this rocky start the two formed a lasting friendship, which, at least in the beginning, was pursued more by Jimmy than Bast, who seemed cautious at accepting this 'farm boy' as he thought of him, into his life.

Around the same time he met William Bast Jimmy also scored his first agent, Isabel Draesemer, who helped him in turn book his first paid acting gig on a Pepsi-Cola commercial. While Draesemer wasn't a big name in Hollywood, being a small time agent, she was a step in the right direction for Jimmy and with her help he booked a few small roles through his college years.

Bast and Jimmy eventually moved into an apartment together (after Jimmy got thrown out of his fraternity for starting a fight over defending Bast's honour when some of his frat brothers assumed, correctly, Bast was gay), with Jimmy promising him he would introduce him to Isabel and try his best to convince her to take him on as well.

Bast, an aspiring actor and writer, was struggling just as much as Dean was to establish himself in the Film industry at the time, and this offer by Jimmy sealed their friendship. But despite these early days of success at UCLA Jimmy battled demons he rarely let anyone else know about. Bast noted he was often moody, sometimes staying inside his room for days at a time without talking with him or anyone.

Like many artists, whether budding rookies or experienced masters, Dean suffered from depression, sometimes severely so, stemming from the traumas of his childhood and teenage years combined with the rocky relationship between him and his father who never tried to understand him.

Mental health treatment then was practically nonexistent. A

few doctors took it seriously but none close to where Jimmy was and even if one had been it's unlikely he would have gone for fear the stigma might destroy his prospects as an actor.

So like many souls Jimmy pushed through on his own, steeling himself against the pain as best he could while honing his craft. In 1950, convinced university would just hold him back, Jimmy dropped out and focused on acting full time, nabbing a role as John the Apostle on Hill Number One, a Easter special about the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.

It was a small role with little money involved, but it was a step up the ladder. Soon thereafter he landed the part of an unnamed soldier in the WW2 film Fixed Bayonets! which went uncredited.

These roles, while important in giving him experience, did not pay his bills. To do that Dean served as a parking lot assistant, a job he excelled at even if he hated it most days. It was while working as a parking lot assistant he met Rogers Brackett, a radio director with many connections in Hollywood.

Brackett, who was gay, saw in Jimmy a vulnerable younger man and wasted little time in pouncing. He acted the concerned father figure at first, helping him land small roles here and there, but in exchange (as well as for a place to stay) Brackett soon began seeking sexual favors from Dean.

Jimmy, already taken advantage of by DeWeerd back in Indiana, gave in to this new 'mentor', pleasuring him whenever he wanted, worried that if he stopped Brackett would somehow make sure he never worked in California ever again.

Apart from his 'relationship' with Brackett Dean spent many hours with Bill Bast who inspired him to widen his reading to include plays, both of the classical variety and modern works by Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, and others.

Through Bast Jimmy also took up clay sculpting, developing a modest talent for it he would retain for the rest of his life. In 1951, acting on the advice of veteran actor James Whitmore, who he took acting classes from in L.A, Jimmy left California for New York, the hub of the arts in the U.S at the time. Here he tried out for, and was accepted into, the Actors' Studio,

one of the most prestigious Drama institutes of the era, though he seems to have not been much of a student, withdrawn and keeping to himself.

While in New York Jimmy earned roles in various CBS shows such as Studio One, The Web, and Kraft Theatre. While away from Brackett physically, the older man continued to exert influence over him from afar, and whenever he visited the city he made sure to pay Dean a visit to 'relive old times'.

With the help of Brackett and a mutual friend, James Sheldon, Dean landed a new agent in the form of Jane Deacy, a former switchboard operator turned acting agent who, it would prove, was well suited to the profession.

It was Deacy who landed Jimmy the role of Bachir, a North African houseboy and gay man, in the adaptation of Andre Gide's The Immoralist in 1952. He won praise for his performance, his emotional power and boyish good looks helping him along the way. This praise turned into calls from Hollywood, and by 1953 Jimmy was hired to portray Cal Trask, the protagonist in East of Eden, an adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel of the same name, thus beginning the

brightest period of his career.

Steinbeck's epic novel deals with generations of families in California, spanning several decades. Cal Trask is one of many Trasks within the book but, as film adaptations tend to do, he became central to the screenplay written by Paul Osborn as his story was decided to be the most compelling and so Osborn made the decision to focus on it.

Elia Kazan, the man picked to bring Osborn's work to life, sought out Dean believing he could pull off the complexities of Cal's character, a belief which proved correct. However Kazan couldn't have foreseen the difficulties Jimmy himself would bring to set.

Working alongside Raymond Massey, a widely revered Canadian actor who played Cal's father Adam, Dean soon proved to be a handful. Prone to improv, ignoring direction, and mumbling, Jimmy's method of acting irritated Massey who had been classically trained at Oxford university and who found improvising, when not called for, greatly distasteful and distracting.

Massey tried appealing to Elia Kazan to speak with Dean, to make him see reason, but Kazan, noting the tension between the two as necessary for the portrayal of father and son (who in the film were at odds with each other) instead focused on intensifying these ill feelings, encouraging Jimmy to improvise and go off script to irk Massey and draw out real frustration.

It worked, bringing to life the rocky relationship between Cal and Adam Trask, but it also permanently soured Massey's impression of Jimmy, whom he never regarded as a serious artist.

One of the most memorable scenes in the film is when Cal, having earned a hundred dollars from speculating beans, tries handing it to Adam. He rejects it coldly and Cal, so the script said, was supposed to run away heartbroken at this rejection.

Instead Jimmy grabbed hold of Massey suddenly, clutching him in an anguished hug while sobbing. This move took Massey completely off guard and all he could do was say 'Cal. Cal' repeatedly.

It landed perfectly with Kazan and later audiences, showcasing Jimmy's instinctive storytelling abilities and his emotional depth.

Once the filming wrapped and screenings were held other producers were able to see the scope of Dean's ability, and many flocked to hire him for their own projects, with the next big role being that of Jim Stark in the film Rebel Without A Cause directed by Nicholas Ray and written by Stewart Stern. The film, about teenage angst and rebellion, was based on the nonfiction book of the same name by Robert Lindner, an American psychologist who studied a young criminal he nicknamed 'Harold' and based his work on his rehabilitation. Beyond basic similarities in theme, the film was not based on the book in any meaningful sense.

In this picture Dean worked alongside Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo, all three forming friendships on set. Wood, having seen Jimmy's portrayal of Cal prior to working with him, had developed a crush on him and greatly admired his passion and commitment to acting and storytelling as a whole.

While she liked him, Jimmy, seeing Italian actress Pier Angeli

at the time, viewed Natalie simply as a friend and a 'little kid.' Despite this their onscreen chemistry was undeniable and the two carried the film. Like with East of Eden Jimmy improvised on the set of Rebel and like with Kazan he found support for this in Nicholas Ray, the two men hitting it off.

Ray, who also experienced a fatherless childhood, connected with Dean on a deep emotional level, understanding him better than others did. He knew Jimmy thrived on improve so allowed him the freedom to think up lines, move as he wished during filming, and generally had little input on his technique. The result was that Rebel turned out to be a masterpiece, it captured how teenagers in the 1940s and 50s felt. Their anger, their confusion regarding their transition into adulthood, and their place in the world, and at the center of it all was Jimmy's role as Jim Stark, the rebel who rose up against authority and who, very much like Jimmy in real life, struggled with who he was and how much his unresolved trauma affected his life.

Shortly after the completion of Rebel Jimmy's romance with Pier Angeli came to an abrupt end, due largely to Pier's mother's influence. Enrichetta Romiti disliked Jimmy both due to his ethnicity, having no Italian blood to speak of, and (worse) not being a Catholic. She hounded Pier to leave him

and marry a good Catholic man, preferrably either an native born Italian or an Italian American.

And Pier caved. Leaving Dean, she later married Italian singer Vic Damone in November of 1954. During the wedding Jimmy sat across on the street on his motorcycle watching the proceedings. He never went in nor said anything. After it was finished he ignited his engine and drove off.

Neither ever got over the other, many of Pier's friends (and Pier herself) stating that Dean was the love of her life, and she was his.

With this heartbreak Jimmy threw himself into the production of Giant where he played the role of Ranch hand Jett Rink. Giant, yet another adaptation of a novel, this time one by Edna Ferber, was directed by George Stevens and written by Fred Guiol. Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor, both legendary actors by this time, were his costars.

Elizabeth quickly warmed up to Jimmy, the two becoming fast friends and confidantes. His working relationship with Rock

Hudson, however, was, much like with Massey, difficult and filled with tension. Like his older Canadian predecessor, Hudson felt Jimmy's approach to acting was unprofessional and unbecoming of an artist. There are also rumours that Hudson, who was gay, made a pass at Dean while working together and Jimmy shot him down, leading to his dislike of him, though whether this truly happened or is just one of many apocryphal stories of Hollywood is anyone's guess at this late date as no evidence exists to confirm or deny it.

Giant and Rebel earned Jimmy the Best Actor Academy nominations and he received an Oscar nomination for East of Eden but he never lived to learn of them.

On September 30th, 1955, while driving his Porsch 550 Spyder to the Salinas Road Races he hoped to enter, Jimmy was traveling on State Route 66 when he tried to beat an oncoming Ford onto Highway 41, saying to his friend and passenger Rolf Wutheric "That guy up there's gotta stop. He'll see us."

The driver didn't and Jimmy wasn't able to stop, smashing head on into the Ford's passenger side. Wutheric, not wearing

his seat belt (not uncommon at the time), was thrown from the vehicle but by some miracle survived the ordeal.

Jimmy wasn't so lucky, suffering a broken neck, a crushed left foot, and multiple fractures in arms and legs, and internal bleeding. The driver, the ironically named Donald Turnupseed, sustained minor injuries.

Losing consciousness almost immediately following the crash Jimmy was pulled from the wreckage by paramedics and placed in ambulance and taken to the Paso Robles War Memorial Hospital where doctors pronounced him dead upon arrival.

He was only twenty four.

Jimmy's remains were taken back to Fairmount where, on October 8th, he was laid to rest in Park Cemetery close to the grave of his great grandfather Cal Dean which, in a sad twist of irony, he had visited only months before.

After his death Jimmy's reputation, strong before, skyrocketed. He became a cultural icon of youthful angst and rebellion. His visceral style of acting left it's marked on his own generation and those who came after, making him into a Hollywood icon even seventy years after his tragic passing.

A giant taken far too soon.